

BYZANTIUM'S EPIC PAST: A TWELFTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

E.M. Jeffreys

This paper is concerned with the only surviving Byzantine epic, whose hero is known as Vasileios Digenis Akritis, Basil the Frontiersman of Double Descent, or as the best known English translation puts it – Basil the Twyborn Borderer,¹ with an epithet that caught the attention of Patrick White.

Every society has its icons, myths and potent names that symbolize its past. In Australia, a whole host spring to mind: the Eureka Stockade, Ned Kelly, Gallipoli, and reaching further back through the English lens, Robin Hood, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and so on. For the Greek-speaking world one of the most potent symbols of this sort is the figure of Digenis. He has been used as the emblem of medieval Hellenism by the major writers of this century – Elytis, Sikelianos, Theotokas and most conspicuously by Palamas in his *Φλογέρα τοῦ Βασιλῆα*.² In Greek folk-song, a vital element of Greek culture during the Tourkokratia and later, but only gradually captured on paper from the early nineteenth century onwards, Digenis is an all pervasive and prominent figure. Versions of his fight with Haros, Death, are found everywhere in the Greek-speaking world, in Asia Minor, the Islands, the Balkan peninsula, as are stories of him and his companions, variously appearing as Constantis, Porphyrios and so on.³ Why should this be such a widespread and well known name? What lies behind it?

There are two ways to approach the question: through the texts and through the historical background. Let us consider the texts first. Versions were discovered towards the end of the nineteenth century – in Trebizond and then in the libraries of Grottaferrata, Athens, Andros, Oxford and finally in the Escorial in Spain.⁴ Considerable nationalistic fervour was shown when the Trebizond and the Grottaferrata versions were first published in the 1880s. Although Digenis was then known as a folk-song figure, recollection of the written text had become shadowy. In the mid-eighteenth century the learned monk Kaisarios Dapontis (1714-84), author of a number of vast and still unpublished tomes, commented that he had seen two copies of the poem about Basileios Digenis Akritis, one illustrated and one not, and wondered why this splendid work had not been printed when others in the same linguistic register – near demotic – and same metre – the fifteen-syllable stress verse – had been:

Τύπωσαν Ἑρωτόκριτον, Σωσάννα, Ἑρωφίλη,
καὶ ἄλλα καὶ δὲν τύπωσαν, κρίμα, καὶ τὸν Βασίλη.⁵

One of the manuscripts seen by Dapontis may have been the rhymed (but unillustrated) version now in Oxford, with a date, 1670, and a known author, Ignatios Petritzis: surprisingly little attention has been given this text and its place in Greek literary history. However, despite Dapontis' gloom, there probably had been an attempt to prepare a version of the poem for publication. In the early sixteenth century, from about 1520 onwards, several texts in demotic Greek were printed in Venice – the Alexander poem, for example,

¹ J. Mavrogordato, *Digenes Akrites* (Oxford 1956).

² For a most informative survey, see G. Kechaioglou, 'Τύχες της βυζαντινῆς ακριτικῆς ποίησης στη νεοελληνικὴ λογοτεχνία: σταθμοὶ καὶ χρήσεις', *Ελληνικά* 37 (1986) 83-109.

³ R. Beaton, *Folk Poetry of Modern Greece* (Cambridge 1980) gives an accessible entrée to the field; see too *idem*, 'Digenes Akrites and Modern Greek folk song: a reassessment', *Byzantion* 51 (1981) 22-43.

⁴ Mavrogordato, *Digenes*, xi-xiii.

⁵ Quoted in E. Trapp, *Digenes Akrites: synoptisches Ausgabe der ältesten Versionen* (Vienna 1971) 15.

Loukanis' revamping of Homer, *Imberios and Margarona*, and so on.⁶ At about this time someone took two versions of the Digenis poem, a copy of the G version (known as G because the surviving manuscript is housed in the monastery of Grottaferrata near Rome) and the E manuscript that we now have (E because it is to be found in the Escorial, where it has been since the late sixteenth century), and combined them to make one omnibus poem, probably some 4500 lines long, on the life and times of Digenis. One has to say probably 4500 lines because the original manuscript of this version is now lost and has to be reconstructed from the sixteenth-century Trebizond manuscript (which has also gone astray since it was last sighted in 1887), and the Athens manuscript, again of the sixteenth century. A compilation of this sort is rather unexpected and scholars in the field have taken some time to accept the evidence: it was first pointed out in 1932, very clearly, by Stilpon Kyriakidis, but it was not until 1971 and Erich Trapp's synoptic edition of the three versions G, E and the compilation, and 1975 and a lengthy paper by Michael Jeffreys that conviction began to seep in.⁷ It is clear, however, that all the late manuscripts derive from the compilation and, though of interest in their own right, can be disregarded in arguments concerning the earliest form of the poem.

This means that discussions of the epic must concentrate on the G and E versions.

E is a puzzle:⁸ it is neatly written in a good hand to which as yet no other manuscripts are attributed, though perhaps the investigation currently under way in Sydney University into the manuscripts of early vernacular Modern Greek may remedy this; it also has spaces for illustrations. Yet the text itself is a mess narratologically and metrically, though recent work by Peter Mackridge suggests that it has a linguistic consistency which may account for the creation of the metrical confusion.⁹ By the watermark the manuscript is to be dated to c. 1485.¹⁰ The text itself is full of turns of phrase that are redolent of later folk-song patternings, but a lacuna occurring in mid-word makes it plain that the scribe was drawing on a written and not an oral source. Nevertheless the E version has very close stylistic and lexical analogies to the *Song of Armouris*, a short ballad-type poem, preserved in a manuscript with the date 1461.

In the mid-twelfth century a poet conventionally known as Ptochoprodromos, Penniless Prodromos, the Poverty-stricken Forerunner, addressed the emperor, Manuel Komnenos (1142-1181), in one of his satirical poems which played around with language registers. Ptochoprodromos called the emperor 'a second Akritis' and used some lines which are an almost direct quotation, or vice versa, from the G version of Digenis:

ὣς τις Ἀκρίτης ἕτερος ἐκεῖ νὰ εὐρέθην τότε,
καὶ τὰς ποδέας νὰ ἐμπήξεν, νὰ ἐπῆρεν τὸ ραβδὶν του

⁶ Details in E. Legrand, *Bibliographie hellénique des XVe et XVIe siècles*, 5 vols (Paris 1895-1906).

⁷ S. Kyriakidis, Παρατηρήσεις εἰς τὰ ακριτικά ἐπῆ, *Laographia* 10 (1932) 623-62; Trapp, *Digenes*; M.J. Jeffreys, 'Digenis Akritas Manuscript Z', *Dodone* (Ioannina) 4 (1975) 163-201 (reprinted in E.M. and M.J. Jeffreys [eds.], *Popular Literature in Late Byzantium* [London 1983] V).

⁸ Editions: Trapp, *Digenes* and S. Alexiou, *Βασιλείος Διγενῆς Ακρίτης* (Athens 1985). English translation: D. Ricks, *Byzantine Heroic Poetry* (Bristol 1990).

⁹ P. Mackridge, 'An editorial problem in medieval Greek texts: the position of the object clitic pronoun in the Escorial *Digenes Akrites*', in N. Panayotakis (ed.), *Ἀρχές της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας Proceedings of the Second International Conference 'Neograeca medii aevi'*, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, vol.1 (Venice 1993) 325-42.

¹⁰ G. Andres, *Catalogo de los codices griegos de la Real Biblioteca de el Escorial*, vol.3 (Madrid 1967) 106.

καὶ μέσα νὰ ἐκατάβηκεν, εὐθὺς ὡς ἀγουρίτης.¹¹

These lines not only reflect rather neatly G 4.116 and 1058 but they also pick up the most salient features of our hero – his name, his distinctive παβδί which in G is almost exclusively Digenis' weapon, his ποδέα which he tucks up into his belt for action, and the term ἀγουρίτης which occurs only in G and in connection with Digenis himself. Later in the same poem it becomes apparent that, for Ptochoprodromos, the Ἀκρίτης ἕτερος is the emperor Manuel:

τὸν Μανουὴλ τὸν Κομνηνόν, ... τὸν νέον τὸν Ἀκρίτην (4. 542, 544).

Something very like the G version of the poem on Digenis Akritis must then have been in existence at this time, in the late 1140s or early 1150s.

G is in fact a manuscript from the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century; it was copied in South Italy, in an area on the fringes of the Greek-speaking world but one where Hellenic culture was undergoing a final florescence.¹² Insufficient attention has been given to this location of G, but now is not the time or place to put this to rights. The G version as we have it has plainly undergone revisions at the hand of probably more than one redactor.¹³ The evidence for this comes from a comparison between G, E and the compilation; we can observe that there is a layer of material in G that is not represented in the E version. This material has much in common with the Εἰς τὴν Σωφροσύνην of the fourteenth-century poet Meliteniotis, and must be due to a common source.¹⁴ The redactors in the G tradition have also imposed a more learned register of the language, sometimes with disastrous syntactical results, and much gnomic moralising.

G and E have some 14 lines completely in common and more that share the same lexical items without being completely identical.¹⁵ This, combined with the fact that the plot in both marches in parallel even down to some quite small and narratologically inessential details, indicates that both – despite superficial wide discrepancies – derive from the same base text. The exact wording of this base text is, however, irrecoverable – the only solution for an editor of this Byzantine epic is to treat both the thirteenth-century G and the fifteenth-century E versions separately, preferably within the same cover though not in parallel columns. One can, however, draw some conclusions about the nature of the underlying base text: it seems structurally to have been extremely disjointed, since both G and E show not only abrupt transitions between episodes but also a lack of consistency within episodes; and the fact that G and E are now at quite different points of the linguistic spectrum with additional peculiarities, in G's case syntactical and in E's metrical, seems to suggest that there was something shocking or disconcerting about the text with which the redactors in the two streams were working. What that might have been will be discussed later.

¹¹ H. Eideneier (ed.), *Ptochoprodromika* (Cologne 1991; *Neograeca Medii Aevi* 5) 149: poem 4, lines 189-91.

¹² For the Otrantine origin of G, see M. Petta, 'Codici greci della Puglia trasferiti in biblioteche italiane ed estere', *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* 26 (1972) 83-129; A. Jacob, 'Les écritures de Terre d'Otrante', in *La paléographie grecque et byzantine* (Paris 1977) 269-81; G. Spadaro, 'Due redazioni inedite di Spancas', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32.3 (1982) 277, 281 n.30.

¹³ Editions: Mavrogordato, *Digenes*; Trapp, *Digenes*; English translations: Mavrogordato, *Digenes*; D.B. Hull, *Digenis Akritas: The Two-Blooded Border Lord* (Athens, Ohio 1972).

¹⁴ Trapp, *Digenes*, 34-5.

¹⁵ R. Beaton, 'Digenes Akritis on the computer: a comparative study of the E and G versions', *Αρχές της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας* (as in n.9), vol.2, 42-68.

So if the texts and their tradition can take us back to the mid-twelfth century, what can be said about their historical background?

There are many layers to the text that underlies G and E. Perhaps the most conspicuous is the stratum dealing with the Byzantine-Arab frontier society of Cappadocia that derives from the ninth and tenth centuries. The picture given would be anachronistic in the twelfth century, since after the Turkish victory at Manzikert in 1071 the whole of the relevant area had been lost to Byzantium. Yet this frontier life is reflected throughout the poem; it is especially prominent in the first half, the so-called Emir's story, which tells of the abduction of Digenis' mother, daughter of a Byzantine *strategos* established in the frontier regions of Cappadocia, and of her marriage to her abductor, an Arab emir from Syria. Their son is thus 'Digenis', of two races, and the second part of the poem describes his youthful exploits, his marriage, his palace and finally his death. In the first part we observe the interaction between Arab and Byzantine communities: there are raids and looting but no large-scale wars; in fact for the most part there seems to be a reasonably peaceful co-existence, with Arab aristocrats shown as fully conversant with Byzantine Greek though their Byzantine counterparts need interpreters. We are told of conversions from Islam to Christianity – first the emir and then his mother and her whole household; and we are shown how the emir is integrated into the Byzantine *oikos* (estate) of his bride's family. All this can be paralleled from non-fictional texts dealing with this period. The frontier life of the general's estates is reflected in Kekavmenos' *Strategicon*, a warrior's musings written in the mid-eleventh century on how to manage one's family, the Arabs camped at one's front door, the local market and so forth.¹⁶ The raids and skirmishes reflect those described in Theophanes Continuatus and Genesios for the 860s and the 940s, though attempts to pin down actual references, for example, to the battle of Poson in 863 are probably misguided.¹⁷ Names that can be discerned behind the distorted forms of G and E seem to refer to Arab and Byzantine rebel leaders of the 840s. The military terminology and topography are those of the ninth and tenth centuries, in some cases from quite a narrow window within that period.¹⁸ Some of the terminology seems to derive from even further in the past: two terms in particular cry out for explanation – ἀκρίτης and ἀπελάτης. *Akritis* is the Greek form for *miles limitaneus*, a soldier stationed on the frontier, a relic of late Roman frontier policy, but still appearing intermittently in tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine texts.¹⁹ Its use in G varies between its military function (applied indiscriminately to Arab and Byzantine alike) and its role as part of Digenis' name – he can also be referred to simply as *Akritis*, the *Akritis*. Is this because he is the Frontiersman *par excellence*, like King Arthur the symbol of a culture's last resistance? Or has the word just slipped into being a name? In E the military connotations of 'Akritis' are even more worn away and only the name functions are left. The *apelates* are more problematic still: the term refers in Synesius' letters to bandits, in the Justinianic code to cattle-thieves, and in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Caerimoniis* to a group of light-armed troops.²⁰ Their function in the *Digenis* poem seems to be that of bandits or brigands – there

¹⁶ B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt (eds), *Cecaumeni Strategicon* (St Petersburg 1896). German translation: H.-G. Beck, *Vademecum des byzantinischen Aristokraten* (Graz 1964).

¹⁷ G. Huxley, 'Antecedents and context of Digenes Akrites', *GRBS* 15.3 (1974) 317-38.

¹⁸ N. Oikonomidès, 'L' "épopée" de Digènes et la frontière orientale de Byzance aux Xe et XIe siècles', *Travaux et Mémoires* 7 (1979) 375-97.

¹⁹ E.g. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, in J. Reiske (ed.), *De Caerimoniis* (Bonn 1829) 489.12; Nikephoros Phokas, *Novellae* (ed. von Lingenthal, *Jus Graecoromanum*, vol.3) 190.23.

²⁰ Synesius, *Epistulae* 132.16; Justinian, *Novellae* (ed. R. Schöll and W. Kroll, Berlin 1928) 22.15.1; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Caerimoniis* 696.4.

is no mention of their stealing cattle, though abduction of women is part of their game; and they, rather than Arabs, are Digenis' chief opponents. There is a blurring of terminology. The question remains: is Digenis a reflection of a historical personage (several identifications, none satisfactory, have been suggested),²¹ or is he a symbol of the symbiotic life of the Byzantine-Arab frontier regions, a happy invention around whom many stories collected, a symbol of peace and reconciliation in a period of constant warfare?

But, we must ask ourselves, how did this tenth-century material end up in a somewhat unconventional twelfth-century text? The very peculiarity of that text may of itself suggest some answers. The view of the past displayed in *Digenis*, or rather in what we discern to be the text underlying G and E, can be described as a homeostatic one, that is, one that telescopes major events of the past in accordance with the preconceptions of the present. Such treatment of the past is one that is typical of an oral, pre-literate society. As such it is not perhaps the sort of technique one would associate with a society as ostensibly literate as the Byzantine. Homeostatic views of the past have been frequently described in connection with, for example, African communities where successive generations can be observed adapting theoretically unchanging orally transmitted records to accord with changing circumstances, adjusting the record of past dynasties to give prominence to the current ruling families: a brief overview of this technique can be found in Walter Ong's book, *Orality and Literacy*.²² If one calls Byzantine society ostensibly literate, by that one means that the high culture of the written word was dominant, but it does not necessarily follow that all elements of Byzantine society participated in that culture. Levels of literacy in Byzantium are hard to assess but certain social classes – perhaps including, for example, women or farmers – and certain communities – remote villages, for instance – would arguably have had little contact with writing and would have functioned at a level of literacy more appropriate to a pre-literate age.²³ Theirs would have been a society governed by the rules of orality. Now there is a whole academic industry examining the techniques by which one identifies in surviving literary texts the marks of passage through a pre-literate, oral phase of transmission.²⁴ The *Digenis* poems as we have them in G and E have many of these signs but very few of those which refer to the level of phraseology and language. It has long been suggested that the many plot disjunctions, like the misdirections given in the Emir's Story to the brothers about their sister's whereabouts, are due to the poem's material having passed through a period of oral transmission when such awkwardnesses would have been less conspicuous.²⁵ And the fact that redactors in both the G and the E tradition have found it necessary to recast the underlying text so markedly suggests that it did not conform to literary expectations. E in its present form shows more signs than G of oral connections. However, a recent study of its verse techniques has demonstrated E's affinities with modern Greek folk-song structures:²⁶ these, I would argue, are due to influences from oral performances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and not from the earliest phases of the poem's existence. But the

²¹ E.g. the turmarch Diogenes killed at Kopidnadon in 788: H. Grégoire, 'Le tombeau et la date de Digénis Akritas', *Byzantion* 6 (1931) 498-9; or the emperor Romanus Diogenes, captured at Manzikert in 1071.

²² W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the technologizing of the word* (London 1982) 46-9.

²³ On Byzantine literacy almost the only study is that of R. Browning, 'Literacy in the Byzantine world', *BMGS* 4 (1979) 39-54.

²⁴ For a practical guide for the uninitiated, see J.M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, Indiana 1988).

²⁵ A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960) 217.

²⁶ B. Fenik, *Digenis: Epic and Popular Style in the Escorial Version* (Herakleion 1991).

conclusion must be that the poem underlying G and E has retained the broad outline of attitudes and events of the ninth and tenth centuries – the uneasy relations between Arabs and Byzantines, the skirmishes with bandits, the putting down of rebels, the border magnates' grandiose estates, a few significant names – but that the historical details must not be pressed into a rigid chronological framework, nor must the identifications of people and events be expected to be chronologically consistent.

However, there is more. Behind the level of reference to the Arab wars of the ninth and tenth centuries and to the frontier societies of the immediately succeeding years, there is a layer which harks back much further still, to the buffer kingdom of Commagene of the first and second centuries A.D. Our hero Digenis built himself a magnificent hill-top tomb: with great glee Henri Grégoire in the 1930s associated this, through geographical references, with the structures at Sesönk, on a tributary of the Euphrates just below Samosata, which were funerary monuments to a king and queen of Commagene.²⁷ They were striking and conspicuous still in Grégoire's day – how much more so would they have been in their prime and over the intervening centuries? Grégoire's argument was that the tomb both preserved memories and gave rise to stories. The situation is confused, however, since E talks of a single-spanned bridge on which the tomb is set – and Alexiou, E's most recent editor, would connect this with another prominent archaeological monument in the same area, the bridge of Septimius Severus over the Bolam Su.²⁸ But the principle remains the same. Then the most truly monumental remains from antiquity in the Euphrates frontier region are the colossal statues on the Nimrud Dagħ to the Commagene royal house – a processional way flanked with gigantic figures and a monumental inscription emphasising the double descent, Persian and Macedonian, of its rulers. Thus the Commagenian royal house was both 'Digenis' and 'Akritis', for their kingdom existed only as a frontier buffer state. If a frontier area might give rise to a legendary hero whose ancestry straddles the borders, then any such legend would surely find support from these remains. And finally there is the old bandit leader, Digenis' chief opponent, who goes by the name of Philopappous. This was not a common name, and it so happens that it was borne by the last representative of the Commagene royal house, C. Julius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappos, exiled to Athens in 72 A.D., and who followed his family's penchant for hill-top monuments by leaving one in Athens on the hill opposite the Akropolis known to this day by his name.²⁹ Again, a homeostatic telescoping of the distant past, of material transmitted by non-literate means.

And it has been argued that there is still more. The most ancient layer of reference in *Digenis* is apparently to the Alexander story. We are told, in the G version (at G 6.386-7), that Maximou, the female *apelatis*, is an Amazon, descendant of those encountered in the Far East by the great Alexander. When the time comes for the hero's premature death clear analogies are made to the Alexander legend: Digenis succumbs to a fever caught after taking an ill-advised bath (G 8.33). But neither of these elements is present in the E version. One must suspect that, although Digenis' territory in Asia Minor and Cappadocia was also the territory attributed to the Amazons by classical geographers and although Grégoire unearthed a second-century inscription at Sebastopolis which referred to a Μάξιμαν τὴν καὶ

²⁷ Grégoire, 'Le tombeau', 499-503.

²⁸ Alexiou, *Διγενής*, ν8-ξη, and plate 6a.

²⁹ M.J. Jeffreys, 'Digenis Akritis and Kommagene', *Svenska Forskningsinstitutet i Istanbul Meddelanden* (Stockholm) 3 (1978) 21-28 (repr. in E.M. and M.J. Jeffreys [eds], *Popular Literature*, VII).

Ἀμαζόνιν, wife of a certain Julius Potitus,³⁰ there was no layer of Alexander material in the text underlying G and E: the Alexander references are almost certainly an insertion by a redactor during the transmission of the G strand of the text.³¹

At the end of the discussion of the texts and their manuscript transmission, a form of the *Digenis* poem was located in the mid-twelfth century on the basis of lines by Ptochoprodromos which are close to lines in G. I would also make the assumption that the poem was put together in Constantinople at about that date; grounds for this are largely *a priori*, though not entirely so, as will shortly be suggested.

The Constantinopolitan literary culture of the mid-twelfth century was very conscious of the historical depth of its past. During the black days of the seventh and eighth centuries this consciousness had diminished but the Macedonian renaissance of the tenth century had restored a full appreciation of the Byzantine heritage. To pluck a few examples at random – by the mid-twelfth century Zonaras had, in his chronicle, given due weight to the Roman Republican background of the empire of East Rome, of which he and his contemporaries well knew they were citizens. Tzetzes had demonstrated the importance of the Hellenic literary heritage by his numerous paraphrases of Homer and the para-Homeric material, and the Christian nature of Constantinopolitan society went without saying.³² Why should a poet functioning in such an environment choose this moment to present in *Digenis Akritis* a compressed view of a frontier society that had virtually ceased to exist nearly a century previously, at the battle of Manzikert?

In 1150 Manuel Komnenos, the νέος Ἀκρίτης of Ptochoprodromos, presided over the dowsing of the last embers of Christian rule on the banks of the Euphrates, the heartland of *Digenis* territory. He offered financial support to Beatrice, Countess of the crusading County of Edessa, when her husband, the Count Joscelin, was captured by Nur ed-Din of Aleppo. In return for Manuel's aid, we are told by crusading and Arab historians – though not by their Byzantine counterparts, the fortresses of Tell Bashir, Revandan, Aintab, Duluk, Bira and Samosata were handed over to Byzantine troops.³³ For the best part of a year Greek forces fought a rear-guard action on the Euphrates frontiers, in the former Commagene, in areas where once *Digenis Akritis* patrolled. But then the armies of Nur ed-Din got the better of the struggle and the County of Edessa disappeared for ever from Byzantine and Christian control, to be divided between the Arabs of Aleppo and the Seljuks of Ikonion.

At this time too, or slightly earlier, there was a move afoot in literary circles that saw the composition of extended works of fiction, focussing for the first time in over eight hundred years on the romantic love between hero and heroine. The motives for this revival of the ancient romance remain opaque – perhaps a sense of revival of the past, perhaps the presence of an audience with new tastes – but the circumstances are suggestive. Theodore Prodromos, Niketas Evgenianos, Efstathios Makrembolitis, Constantine Manassis, clearly with awareness of one another's experiments, produced a series of pastiches on the novels of

³⁰ H. Grégoire, 'L'Amazone Maximè', *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire orientales et slaves* 4 (1936) 723-30.

³¹ U. Moennig, *Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte des mittel- und neugriechische Alexanderromans* (Cologne 1989; *Neograeca mediae aevi* 2).

³² For a stimulating discussion along these lines, see R. Macrides and P. Magdalino, 'The Fourth Kingdom and the Rhetoric of Hellenism' in P. Magdalino (ed.), *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (London 1992) 117-56.

³³ William of Tyre XVII, 16-17; see S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol.2 (Harmondsworth 1965) 328-9; M.W. Baldwin (ed.), *A History of the Crusades*, vol.1 (Wisconsin 1969) 533-4.

late antiquity in a range of forms – prose and several varieties of verse – all set in a vaguely undifferentiated antique past.³⁴ Given that works of fiction, especially with an interest in romantic love, are rare at any stage in Byzantine literary history, I would place the text that underlies G and E firmly in this context. *Digenis Akritis* has much in common with the novels: a plot clearly based on romantic love – that of Digenis' parents and his own love for his wife; constant adventures which threaten to separate the lovers; and frequent moralising comments based on the plot.

I would suggest then, that, following the upheaval on the frontiers brought about by the Byzantine defeat at Manzikert in 1071, rough oral songs from the frontiers were brought to Constantinople in the wake of the displaced communities. The presence of Manuel in Syria in 1150 stimulated a writer in the Capital to try to turn this material into a more sophisticated literary form on the lines of the novels which were then generating interest. I would suggest, however, that the experiment made little progress. The hypothetical author, for whatever reason, gave up his attempt after doing little more than impose a biographical outline on his material. This rough version probably bristled with linguistic and metrical problems, perhaps resulting from its archaic sources. It is this that lies behind the G and E that we have today, preserving for us a nostalgic view from the mid-twelfth century of life on Byzantium's Euphrates' frontier some three centuries earlier, through which may still be dimly discerned the folk-lore of Commagene some six centuries before that. Rarely is the continuity of empire which is so permanent a part of Byzantine ideology so well supported by details of the archaeology of a surviving text.

³⁴ The most recent discussions of these problematic texts include R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance* (Cambridge 1989) 67-87 and S. MacAlister, 'Byzantine Twelfth-Century Romances: A Relative Chronology', *BMGS* 15 (1991) 175-210.